

What Works
Mobilizing the Masses
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Stanford Social Innovation Review
Summer 2013

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Mobilizing the Masses

The Liberty Hill Foundation concentrates on helping community activists create lasting change in Los Angeles. **BY PHUONG LY**

LOOMING FIVE STORIES TALL and weighing more than 600,000 tons, the pile of rubble seemed immovable. The debris, collected from freeways damaged by the 1994 Northridge earthquake in southern California, sat in the midst of a residential neighborhood in Huntington Park, producing clouds of dust that coated the houses. A concrete recycling business operated on the site with few limitations, thanks to a permit issued by the city in an attempt to spur economic growth. Residents blamed the gritty air for their respiratory problems and dying gardens, but being low-income and mostly Latino, they had little hope that their complaints could bring down what they called “La Montana,” the mountain.

But then the Liberty Hill Foundation stepped in. The Los Angeles foundation began funding the residents’ fledgling activism. As the campaign grew, it leveraged protests, environmental studies, and a public tour of the site that grabbed the attention of government officials and the media.

In 2004, after a decade of activism and legal battles, cleanup of La Montana began. Liberty Hill continued to support activism in the area, and in 2009 the residents helped stop a power plant from being built in an adjacent community.

The fight over La Montana “was something that on the surface didn’t look like a winnable campaign,” says Bill Gallegos, executive director of Communities for a Better Environment, which helped coordinate the residents. “But it really illustrated what the community could do, given some help.”

Unlike most foundations, Liberty Hill doesn’t fund social services, such as after-school programs or health clinics. With the motto “Change. Not Charity,” the foundation focuses on community organizing—empowering people to affect public policy.

Four activists from wealthy families founded Liberty Hill in 1976, taking its name from a site in San Pedro, Calif., where in 1923 the muckraking author Upton Sinclair spoke to a rally of striking dockworkers. In 2012, the foundation gave out about \$3.1 million to 365 organizations in the Los Angeles area, ranging from newly formed neighborhood groups to long-established regional networks. (Since 1976 Liberty Hill has given out more than \$50 million.) The activists’

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money got the foundation off the ground, but Liberty Hill now raises its funds from a variety of foundations, businesses, wealthy individuals, and scores of small supporters.

Like the activists it funds, Liberty Hill pushes boundaries. The foundation doesn’t merely provide funding—it trains leaders, coordinates meetings, and brokers collaborations. Whereas many foundations shy away from controversy and politics, Liberty Hill stands on the front lines of the most heated issues—environmental justice, economic justice, and gay and lesbian rights—and is often the first to fund a group.

With its successes, particularly in environmental issues, Liberty Hill is inspiring other foundations. Rip Rapson, president of the Kresge Foundation, says that when its program officers became interested in how the environment affects health, Liberty Hill’s work became their guide. They were impressed by the breadth of the coalition that Liberty Hill had assembled to find ways to reduce pollution around the Port of Los Angeles. The

results include an agreement by the port to phase out high-emissions trucks and the establishment of a trust fund (drawn from port fees) for public projects to benefit neighboring low-income communities.

Young activists, with support from the Liberty Hill Foundation, protest a planned expansion of Los Angeles ports in 2011.



The Kresge Foundation now helps fund Liberty Hill's efforts in Los Angeles and is using it as a model for work at Texas ports. Liberty Hill "understands the complexity of community change and the need to pull together different players," Rapson says. "These are big pressing problems, and the fact that they're making progress gets noticed."

FACILITATING CHANGE

Although Liberty Hill has status and money, it doesn't want to be considered the leader or creator of change. Instead, foundation officials say their role is to provide the structure for community members to take charge.

"That's what really creates lasting social change—having a community of residents who are educated about public policy and issues and want to continue working into the future to make a better world for themselves and their children," says Michele Prichard, Liberty Hill's director of common agenda. (In 2012, the Council on Foundations awarded its highest honor to Prichard.)

Citizen participation is so valued by Liberty Hill that grant-making decisions are made by a board that includes community activists as well as donors. Liberty Hill's founders believed that those who were the most affected by injustice knew the most about their community's needs and strategies to solve them. Board members take a hands-on approach, visiting every site that is a final contender for funds.

Besides providing funding, Liberty Hill helps organizations to build their capacity. Through the foundation's Leadership Institute, new community organizers learn the nuts and bolts of building campaigns, raising funds, and navigating the policy-making process. Grantees are introduced to each other as well as to mentors, and Liberty Hill encourages collaboration among them by convening meetings.

Angelo Logan, who founded East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice in 2001, calls his first grant of \$1,900 from Liberty Hill the "seed of possibility." Logan worked as a maintenance mechanic at an aerospace manufacturer before he became concerned about the increasing pollution from the rail yards and trucking routes in his southeast Los Angeles community. He had no experience doing community organizing and remembers feeling overwhelmed and frustrated.

Through Liberty Hill's programs, Logan says he gained skills and confidence. "The more you're surrounded by a community of strong leaders and strong advocates, you feel like you're not alone, and you can continue to work hard at what you believe in," he says.

Logan's group works on community problems such as stopping the removal of hundreds of trees in the city of Commerce. But it also is part of a collaborative of grantees working to change regional and statewide environmental policy.

The Los Angeles Collaborative for Environmental Health and Justice, launched in 1996, marked a turning point for Liberty Hill's environmental efforts. In addition to being a grantmaker and a provider of training, the foundation became a facilitator of partnerships and projects. Prichard says that Liberty Hill hoped to leverage the collective power of the groups for bigger change, rather than fighting "smokestack by smokestack."

The collaborative claimed a significant victory in 2004 when the California Environmental Protection Agency agreed to acknowledge and address the disproportionate burden of pollution carried by low-income neighborhoods. Since then, the collaborative has convinced policymakers to provide health safeguards in a freeway expansion plan and convert Los Angeles's bus fleet to clean natural gas, in addition to pushing the Port of Los Angeles to cut pollution.

Logan credits the successes to the groundswell of people working on the issues. "This is bigger than Liberty Hill, bigger than any one organization," he says. "It's a movement."

IN FOR THE LONG HAUL

Community organizing and policymaking campaigns often stretch on for years. Recognizing that social change takes time, Liberty Hill's strategy is to invest in "patient capital." Unlike many foundations, Liberty Hill doesn't limit the number of times it funds a group. Groups can continue to apply, and be funded, as long as they show incremental progress.

Prichard says that this type of long-term commitment can help smooth tensions. For example, the policy advocates within a coalition will often want to move ahead with a negotiation before the community organizers have finished going door-to-door to get more residents involved. But with Liberty Hill's assurance that long-term funding is available, there's less pressure to move forward too quickly. "Collaboration takes time to work things through," Prichard says. "The community groups need to get the buy-in and understanding of the neighborhood residents."

Romel Pascual, Los Angeles's deputy mayor for the environment, says Liberty Hill's long-term view and deep community roots help inform policymaking. After Antonio Villaraigosa was elected mayor of Los Angeles in 2005, he and his staff talked to Liberty Hill about a vision for economic growth that would include environmental considerations.

"We needed to make sure we were moving in the right direction," Pascual says. "They're hands on. They know what are the emergent issues in the community. They know who the players are." With Liberty Hill brokering the relationships, the result was the Clean Up Green Up campaign. Working with community groups, the city is creating incentives to attract green businesses to low-income communities and beef up anti-pollution enforcement.

Prichard says the initiative represents how far the environmental justice movement in Los Angeles has progressed. "We're moving from being opposed to this development and that development to proposing green economic development," she says. "This is a new stage and a work in progress."

In Huntington Park, where residents first flexed their power against the mountain of rubble, the landscape is changing. Community members are working with the city and the Environmental Protection Agency to transform brown fields into businesses and neighborhoods. Where La Montana once stood is a new school, Linda Esperanza Marquez High School, named after a community activist whose apartment had faced the rubble. "It's a great tribute to the power of everyday, ordinary people," Prichard says. "When they organize together, what was a threat can be turned into a vision." ■